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St John's Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space

Victoria M. Young

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In 1957, J.M. Richards discussed a new Roman Catholic church in Basildon, St Basil's, in the *Architectural Review*.¹ 'I don't have to begin in this instance,' he wrote, 'by analysing the function of the building.' For Richards, 'the purpose of a church' was something 'fixed and unalterable and therefore does not involve the architect in a search for improvement in the programme he is initially set, as a factory often does, or a hospital.' Yet, as a growing number of historians have shown, church and cathedral architecture in the middle of the twentieth century was hardly 'fixed and unalterable', as Richards put it, but in many cases involved experiments not only with architectural form and structure but also layout. The results were often striking and innovative. Some writers, such as Robert Proctor, Elain Harwood, and Ayla Lepine and Kate Jordan, have approached the subject typologically, illustrating how religious architecture was re-made by a range of people – architects, the clergy, engineers and congregations – in response to evolving views of the church's purpose and its services.² Others have looked at architects whose output included religious buildings alongside other work, showing how these

¹ J.M. Richards, 'Criticism: Church at Basildon New Town', *Architects' Journal*, 125/3239 (28 March 1957), pp. 459–63 (p. 459).

² See e.g. Robert Proctor, *Building the Modern Church: Roman Catholic Church Architecture in Britain, 1955 to 1975* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014); Elain Harwood, *Space Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture 1945 – 1975* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), ch. 10; Ayla Lepine and Kate Jordan (eds.), *Modern Architecture and Religious Communities 1850 – 1970: Building the New Kingdom* (forthcoming, 2016).

buildings were reflected broader architectural debates, and that in turn they informed those debates.³

A recent addition to this burgeoning literature is Victoria M. Young's new account of St John's Abbey Church in Collegeville, Minnesota. This church was designed for a Benedictine community by Marcel Breuer in the mid-1950s, and, when completed, represented a significant and sometimes controversial example of Modern ecclesiastical architecture. For some, it demonstrated the church's engagement with the modern world; for others, it was inappropriately contemporary in its apparent functionalism and stark concrete. As a close examination of the genesis and development of a single project that draws in detail on archival sources (the institution's own, and those from the Breuer office), Young's study embodies a well-established historiographical approach, following in the footsteps of, for example, such classic studies as Eduard Sekler and William Curtis' examination of Le Corbusier's Carpenter Center at Harvard.⁴ Yet whereas the core of Sekler and Curtis' book is a reconstruction of the day-by-day evolution of Le Corbusier's design, Young's focus is broader, and ultimately less archaeological. Her account of St John's is ultimately one of collaboration, in which Breuer worked with the Benedictines and a carefully chosen range of artists to realise a building of striking concrete form that also reflected a search for a more participatory liturgy.

³ See e.g. Harwood, *Space Hope and Brutalism*, and also studies including Clive Fenton and David Walker, 'The Modern Church', in *Basil Spence: Buildings and Projects*, eds. Louise Campbell, Miles Glendinning, and Jane Thomas (London: RIBA Publishing, 2012), pp. 104–17; Louise Campbell, 'Coventry Cathedral', in the same volume; and Johnny Rodger (ed.), *Gillespie Kidd and Coia: Architecture, 1956 – 87* (Glasgow: The Lighthouse, 2007).

⁴ Eduard Sekler and William J.R. Curtis, *Le Corbusier at Work: the Genesis of the Carpenter Centre for the Visual Arts* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1978).

The new St John's Abbey Church replaced a late nineteenth-century structure which after the Second World War was too small for an expanding community; by this date, it encompassed not only the Benedictine foundation but also a university and schools. The monks initially planned to oversee the design of the new church themselves, but soon realised that the scale of the project was more than they could manage. A key part of the commission was a campus master plan, intended to guide a century of development. The new buildings themselves were to be of high architectural quality: as Young argues, 'the Benedictines believed in the power of their liturgical vision to create architecture of international and lasting significance.'⁵ Furthermore, they would be modern. As the monks put it at the time, 'the Benedictine tradition at its best challenges us to think boldly and to cast our ideas in forms which will be valid for centuries to come'.⁶

Particularly fascinating is Young's discussion of the selection of Breuer. Often the historian of Modern architecture interested in why a particular architect was selected for an institutional commission faces a real search for evidence. Documents have frequently been lost, or, if they survive, often comprise little more than meeting minutes that simply record who was considered and then conclude with the name of the selected designer. The detailed, perhaps behind-the-scenes discussion that might reveal why a particular choice was made (or even why a particular name was suggested) frequently goes undocumented.⁷ It is, therefore, a real treat to have a detailed reconstruction of the process that led to Breuer's selection. The list of architects drawn up by the Benedictines included not only some with experience of church design –

⁵ Victoria M. Young, *St John's Abbey Church: Marcel Breuer and the Creation of a Modern Sacred Space* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. 31–32.

⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 32.

⁷ Alistair Fair, ' "Brutalism Among the Ladies: Modern Architecture at Somerville College, Oxford, 1947–67', *Architectural History*, 56 (2014), pp. 357–92 (pp. 365–66).

such as Barry Byrne and Rudolf Schwarz – but also internationally prominent figures including Walter Gropius, Eero Saarinen, Richard Neutra, and Marcel Breuer. The only British name on the list was perhaps the most unexpected. Thomas Sharp was a town planner who in the 1940s had produced plans for cities including Oxford and Exeter that embodied the then-fashionable philosophy of Townscape. The Benedictines were reportedly drawn to his evident ability to formulate an overall vision for a place, and to the importance that he afforded religious buildings within these plans.⁸ One wonders why Basil Spence was not considered for the job, as he had recently won the competition to design the new Coventry Cathedral, then one of the most prominent church-building projects in Europe. It can hardly have been that he was not a Catholic, for Breuer was a member of the Lutheran church. Perhaps the monks concluded (as did others in the early 1950s)⁹ that Spence would be too busy in Coventry to devote their project the time that it needed. Breuer secured the commission by listening: he apparently barely spoke for much of the early part of his initial meeting with the Benedictines, and when he did it was to ask questions. Such a low-key approach puts one in mind of Denys Lasdun's winning performance when interviewed as a possible designer of the National Theatre in London. Lasdun's competitors arrived for their interviews with large retinues, but Lasdun appeared before the panel alone, and seemed willing to listen rather than to impose.¹⁰

The *parti* of Coventry Cathedral reportedly came to Spence 'during the first five minutes of [his] visit to Coventry' and remained constant thereafter; the detail of the cathedral's zig-zag walls came to Spence as a kind of heavenly

⁸ Young, *St John's*, p. 47.

⁹ Basil Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry: the Building of a Cathedral* (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1964), p. 21.

¹⁰ Laurence Olivier, *Confessions of an Actor* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1982), pp. 258–59.

vision while he lay anaesthetised in his dentist's chair.¹¹ In contrast, Breuer's approach to the design of St John's is framed here in rather more rational terms. It demonstrates the approach later advocated by reformers such as the Anglican priest and writer Peter Hammond, for whom successful church design lay in the translation into built form of functional requirements. The Benedictines supplied Breuer with commentaries on studies of the liturgy and church architecture. In parallel, there were many discussions between client and architect, while 'space and occupancy study drawings' were also made.¹² These texts and drawings would make fascinating reading: I wanted to know more about them. One wonders if the process was as precise as was the case in the late 1960s at Clifton Cathedral, Bristol, where, as Robert Proctor has outlined, the architects worked 'anthropologically' to map and analyse the ritual of the liturgy.¹³

Young's account of the chronology of Breuer's basic concept rests largely on an explanatory diagram produced by the architects for their client, which illustrates a range of possible plans and discusses their strengths and weaknesses, and which concludes with the selected option.¹⁴ But just how sequential was the process in reality? Were all these options (including traditional a cruciform plan with a rood screen) seriously entertained? The drawing seems a little like a post-rationalisation. The church's executed fan-shaped plan was certainly a favoured form in Modern architecture for theatres and assembly halls. Not only that, it was one that Breuer had used in such projects as the 1936 City of the Future and his UNESCO building. Yet by bringing all worshippers together within a single space, the arrangement was

¹¹ Spence, *Phoenix at Coventry*, pp. 11–12.

¹² Young, *St John's*, p. 71.

¹³ Robert Proctor, 'Modern Church Architect as Ritual Anthropologist: Architecture and Liturgy at Clifton Cathedral', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 15/4, pp. 359–72.

¹⁴ Young, *St John's*, p. 73.

not inappropriate. During the first half of the twentieth century, St John's was a key North American centre in the Liturgical Movement, which sought to reshape Catholic practice along participatory lines, with, for example, the Mass said in English and the altar brought forward from the east wall so that the priest would face the congregation during the service. These ideas would subsequently achieve official status following the Second Vatican Council of 1962–65.

Internally, St John's offers a carefully orchestrated journey for worshippers along a 'spiritual axis' that moves through an unfolding sequence of spaces and in which the contributions of artists play an important role. Chief among these contributions is the large north window by Bronislaw Bak, who was selected by the monks in preference to Breuer's favoured Josef Albers. In this respect, the church, for all its sculptural concrete, was also a resolutely traditionally conceived *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which intangible questions of 'atmosphere' assumed significance alongside more obviously quantifiable functions. One might argue that it was in fact this focus on art within an overall liturgical journey which elevated what might otherwise be a auditorium of fairly generic plan (if not section).

In some ways, the conception of Young's account as a close reading of a single building is its weakness. A more expansive treatment might have allowed a deeper analysis by situating the project more clearly in Breuer's *oeuvre*, or by examining other contemporary attempts to form a new setting for Catholic worship (including, perhaps, Gibberd in Liverpool, or the rich seam of church-building in France and Belgium).¹⁵ A broader discussion of the

¹⁵ E.g. Sven Sterken, 'A House for God or a Home for His People? The Church-Building Activity of Domus Dei in the Belgian Archbishopric', *Architectural History*, 56 (2013), pp. 387–425.

fundamental idea of the modern church might also have been revealing, perhaps building on the ways in which some historians such as Hilde Heynen and Sarah Williams Goldhagen have in recent years sought to advance our understanding of Modern architecture by presenting the acts of design and building as discourses on the condition of modernity itself.¹⁶ Certainly Young's discussion of the history of Modernism is almost too straightforward: as she has it, architects during the first half of the twentieth century soon tired of 'steel-and-glass boxes' and instead 'embraced organic, playful forms that went beyond the rectilinear and entered the realm of expressionism'.¹⁷ Such a view skates over not only the more complex interpretations of Heynen, Goldhagen *et al* but also the argument of Colin St-John Wilson and others for an 'other tradition' of Modern architecture in which just such 'expressionism' is central.¹⁸

Yet, at the same time, the book's close focus is also a real strength. By presenting what might initially seem solely like a sculptural work of art as instead a carefully calibrated response to functional requirements, and as a (sometimes tense) collaborative endeavour involving contributions from the designers, clients, constructors and artists, it reminds us of the often messy realities of building. Architecture emerges from Young's analysis as the complex product of a process of design, construction, and reception: in this respect, the book deserves to be read by practising designers as much as historians, because it provides a detailed case study in how a design was made (literally) concrete and the challenges that were overcome along the journey. At the same time, it makes an important point in terms of

¹⁶ Hilde Heynen, *Architecture and Modernity: a Critique* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1999); Sarah Williams Goldhagen, 'Something to talk about: Modernism, Discourse, Style', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians (JSAH)* 64/2 (June 2005), pp. 144–67.

¹⁷ Young, *St John's*, p. 33.

¹⁸ Colin St-John Wilson, *The Other Tradition of Modern Architecture: the Uncompleted Project* (London: Academy Editions, 1995).

architectural history, successfully demonstrating the value of an approach rooted in the archive rather than the abstract.

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